

## Journeys of Mike and Wayland: Reflections on a Friend and Mentor

By Paul Gifford

I write this having recently returned from a Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) winter camping trip. When I arrived in the parking lot at 5 pm, it was empty; the CELP group had gone in about midday. I was heading in on my own and would meet them at their first camp. It was quiet and beautiful — the blue light of the late afternoon in late February. And snow. I took a deep breath.

One thing about journeys is that you move. You keep moving. It's highly therapeutic. I couldn't stand around: I had about a half hour of good light and an hour's snowshoe, so I had to get moving. I loaded my toboggan and I stepped into my snowshoes. That felt really good. I grabbed the haul line and began to walk. I took another deep breath and thought of Mike. Walking and thinking; the trail and a story.

Mike was a close friend, and he was also my mentor. He helped me find my way into teaching and he drew me into traditional winter camping. My first winter camping experience was with Mike 16 years ago in Killbear Provincial Park, near Parry Sound. Mike was thinking up CELP way back then — even before then. Mike could see so far ahead. I'm sure he was writing about CELP (or what would become CELP) in his journal on that trip.

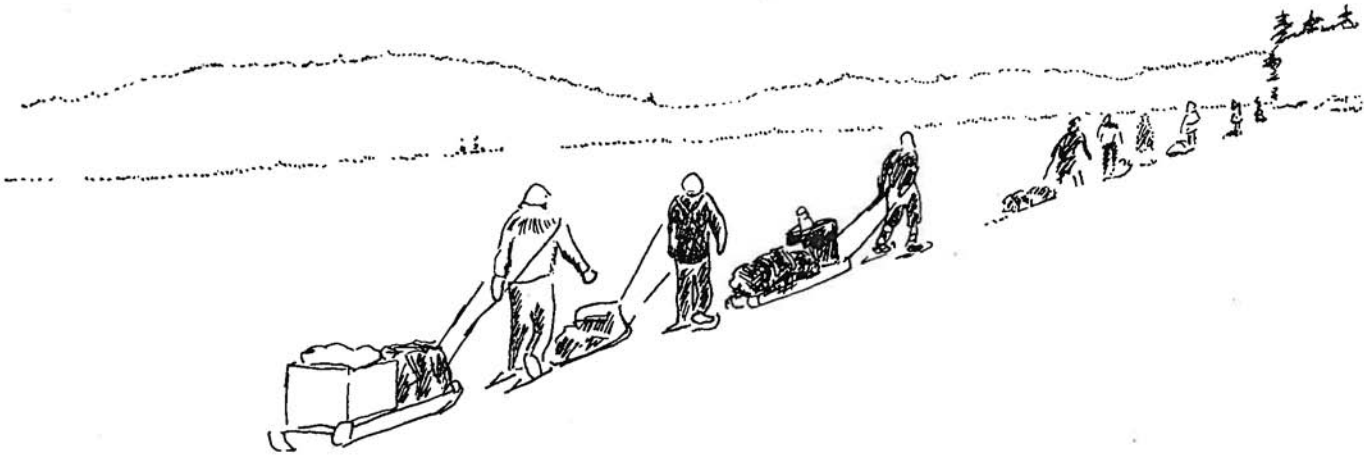
It was late January 1994 and exam week at Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute — a week between semesters. (I bet this is when Mike got the idea to do his winter pre-trip for CELP and Headwaters during exam week. He's done that ever since.) On the 1994 trip, Mike and a mutual friend, Britta Little, and I had added an element to our adventure that inspired observer Jim Raffan to call that trip "our pilgrimage." On the way to Killbear Park we visited Wayland Drew, author of the novel *Halfway Man*. This book was a big deal for Mike and me. It's part of CELP. We read

from it on the most recent winter trip. Mike reread *Halfway Man* for the last time when he was in the hospital last summer, when he was in the process of being diagnosed with cancer. Understandably, he was having trouble focusing on reading anything, and so Heather brought him the one book she thought he could settle in with. It worked.

Mike first read *Halfway Man* when he was a student of Bob Henderson's at McMaster University.<sup>1</sup> Mike loved the book, and he loaned me his copy in the summer of 1993. I recall reading the last few chapters in a tree overlooking the Eramosa River in Guelph.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, I connected. Sometime between then and January of 1994, Mike and I planned the Killbear trip. Well, Mike planned the trip and roped me into it. He wanted to test out some ideas and he needed some help. He was forever doing this, dragging his friends into his experiments. Britta and I didn't realize just how experimental this one was.

Killbear is near Parry Sound. I knew that Wayland Drew lived in Bracebridge. So my idea was that we could get up really early and drive from Guelph to Bracebridge, visit Wayland, then drive to Killbear Provincial Park and make camp. I didn't know Wayland, I just called him up and told him how much I loved his book and then asked if we could drop in and see him. He said, "Sure, come on up." So we did. I must say that Mike was just as excited about this as I was.

We arrived at Wayland's house midday, and he and his wife welcomed us in and served us a massive lasagne for lunch. Mike noticed that Wayland removed his watch when he sat down at the dinner table. Mike noticed stuff like that. The watch removal was a gesture of hospitality: stay as long as you want; time is not of the essence here. We stayed for three hours. We talked about a lot of things — the book, the trail, canoe trips, Lake Superior,



teaching. We talked and talked. Wayland Drew was not only a gifted writer; he was also a gracious host and a good listener.<sup>3</sup> We would have stayed for another three hours, but we decided we'd better hit the road because we had to get to the park and pitch the tent; and Mike had just admitted that he wasn't "completely" sure about how the tent worked — an understatement as it turned out. He said that daylight would be good, but there would also be an almost full moon.

I had never done any kind of winter camping, and had no idea what Mike meant by "traditional" winter camping. Meanwhile, he'd never done it either, and he had borrowed all the equipment from Bob Henderson, with verbal instructions on how to pitch the tent, what wood to burn, and how to manage the stove. Mike later joked that we were like tourists renting canoes in Stratford. Except that this was Killbear Provincial Park in January: it was 30 below and dark and we were staying overnight in a tent he'd never set up. But Mike, in his own way (I'm sure many readers will understand), had a handle on it. And we got through the night. We more than got through it. We revelled in it. By the woodstove, by candlelight, we laughed and told stories and Mike read from *Halfway Man*. We fell asleep. Mike stoked the fire that night. He was a good stoker.

I didn't know it then, but Mike and I were making a pivotal connection between the book and the trail, between narrative and landscape. Mike developed that connection

into an art. My favourite passage from *Halfway Man* reminds me of Mike:

*And as his tale swirled in some dam of memory or imagination, what he told me became landscape and narrative both. I think I know now what he was doing. He was telling both me and the land into being. He was teaching me that the real world was not substance, but story, that tales contain the only world we'll ever really know. And that behind the haven of our tales lies a great mystery. (p. 25)*<sup>4</sup>

I read that passage to the CELP students on our most recent winter trip. While I read it a big, healthy-looking Grey Jay landed on a tree beside us. Mike really like Grey Jays. And if you read *Halfway Man*, you'll know what I was thinking when that Grey Jay landed.

The copy of *Halfway Man* I read from on the CELP trip was the very same copy that Mike had "loaned me" 16 years ago. It had been on the trip to see Wayland Drew. Mike read from it that night in the tent. I asked Mike if I could keep that copy and buy him a new one. He said, "Giff, I'd be honoured if you kept it. I'll get myself another one." When Mike used the "H-word" (honour), it was always a good sign.

I've taken that book out on almost every trip I've been on since — snowshoeing, canoeing, hiking — upwards of 50 trips into many places Mike loved — Algonquin Park, Magnetawan River country, Georgian Bay,

and Lake Superior, where the story is set. Landscape and narrative, both. The book looks like where it has been: It is tattered and dirty; there are dead bugs stuck to some of the pages, and several solid coffee stains. There are many dog-eared pages. On the CELP trip, Janet Dalziel read the story of Many Arms (p. 119) to the students as a bedtime story, which is an essential ritual of the winter tent. I chimed in, playing the role of Many Arms — “I’ll take that! That’s mine.” Most of the students fell asleep during the story, a reflection of a good day on the trail, not a bad story. I blew out the beeswax candle (Mike used only beeswax candles), and set up to stoke the stove for the night. I put a big piece of hardwood in the stove, lay back and thought of Mike.

In the hospital I read him the three winter stories from *Halfway Man*, one of which was the story of Many Arms. For the first story, he was awake. He kept nodding and chiming in. At the end of the story, I said, “And that is the first story.”

“The first of three,” Mike said

“And there is no fourth?” I said.

“The fourth is yet to happen,” Mike said.

I read the second and third stories to Mike



when he was unconscious in his final days. I don’t know if he heard me. I had hoped that the fourth story would be one of recovery, or at least an extended life. But it was not to be, and we don’t know where that story is. That last story was part of the journey yet to be taken.

I look back on my career and my life and I find Mike on the trail, just off to the side, because it was my trail, not his. But he had helped guide me. In his wonderful, gentle, artful and affirming way, he’d guided. I see him there: he’s grinning and nodding approval. His blue eyes are lit up. He’s alive.

Walking out of the park at the end of the trip, I felt good. The trail had worked its magic. I’d spent a lot of time with Mike, and his spirit was alive in that place and in this remarkable program. We can do this, you know. We can carry on: in part, because we have to, for Mike is gone. But we are here, and many of us are here, in part, because of him. For that we can be grateful. For him we should keep doing what we do, we should keep moving. For Mike.

### Endnotes

1. It should be said that Bob was a mentor for Mike. We choose our mentors, and I know Mike felt that it was Bob who helped him clarify his ideas around becoming a teacher, and of how outdoor education could figure into it. Imagine if Mike had not taken that course from Bob?
2. That was Mike’s river. He grew up within walking distance of it, and as a teenager he carried his racing kayak to the river from his house. Mike set up a slalom course on the river where he trained for hundreds of hours.
3. Wayland Drew died about 12 years ago of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) — another untimely passing, another tragedy. But his work (and that book in particular) lives on.
4. Editor’s note: Paul is sharing this quote from memory.

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